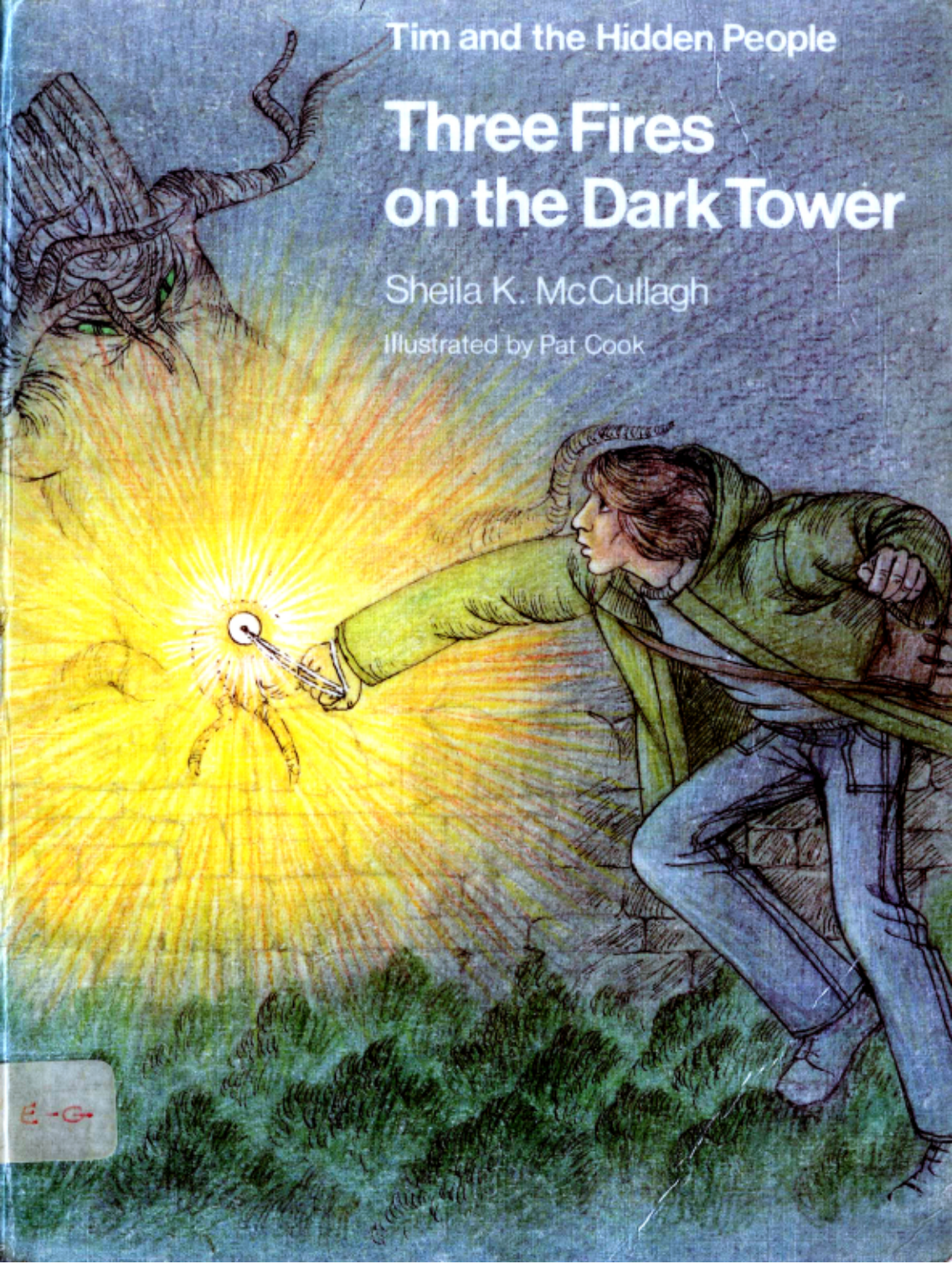


Tim and the Hidden People

Three Fires on the Dark Tower

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



E-G

Three Fires on the Dark Tower



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ARNOLD-WHEATON



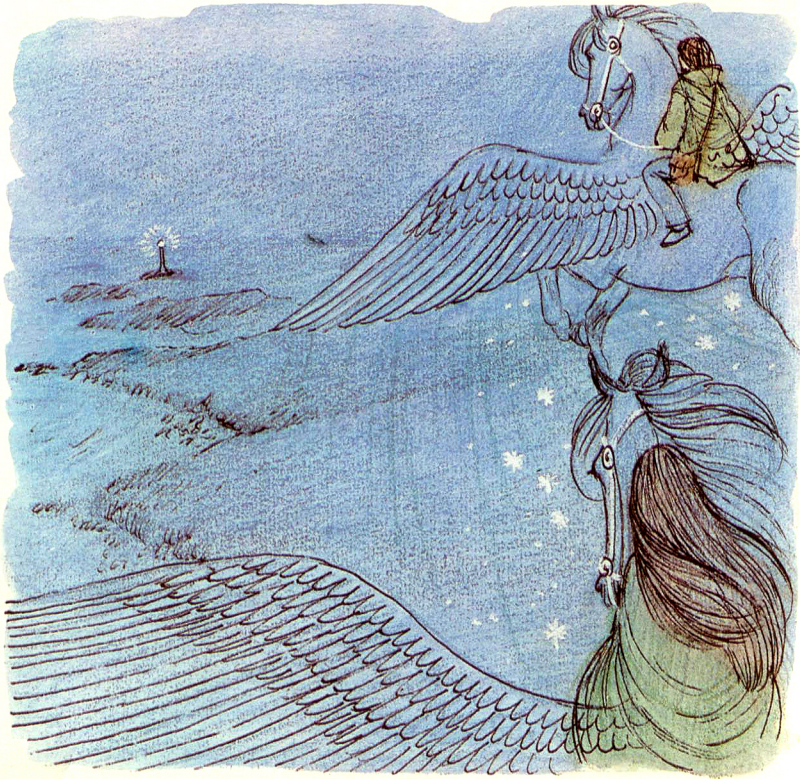
The night was full of stars. Tim could see the north star shining in the dark sky, as the wings of the big night-horse lifted and fell, lifted and fell under him.

He looked over his shoulder. Nicola and Jeremy were flying just behind him. None of the horses seemed afraid. Their eyes were friendly, and their long tails streamed out behind them as they flew.

Sebastian was sitting in front of Tim, pressed up against him. Tim could feel that Sebastian was excited by the ride. He looked down. They were flying very high now. He could see the moon shining on a lake below them, and great bare hills on every side. Here and there he could see houses, white in the moonlight, and sometimes he could see lighted windows.

They left the lake and the houses behind them, and flew north. For a long time there seemed to be nothing below but the dark moorland and the high, bare hills.

They flew on and on. Then there were more lakes, and yet more hills. From time to time, Tim saw the headlights of a car on a road below, but the country seemed to be getting wilder and stranger. Tim looked back from time to time, but there was no one following them. The night was very clear. The countryside below them lay silent, under the silver moon.



At last, looking away to his left, Tim saw a great sheet of water, and knew that they must have come to the sea.

Soon, he could see the white waves breaking on the rocks and sands below him. There were islands out to sea. He could see lighthouses on some of the islands, with their lights flashing across the dark water. He could hear the murmur of the waves, breaking on the rocky shore below him.



On they flew, on and on and on. Tim was beginning to wonder if they would ever get to the Dark Tower that night, when the horse he was riding held his great wings spread out, and began a long glide downwards.

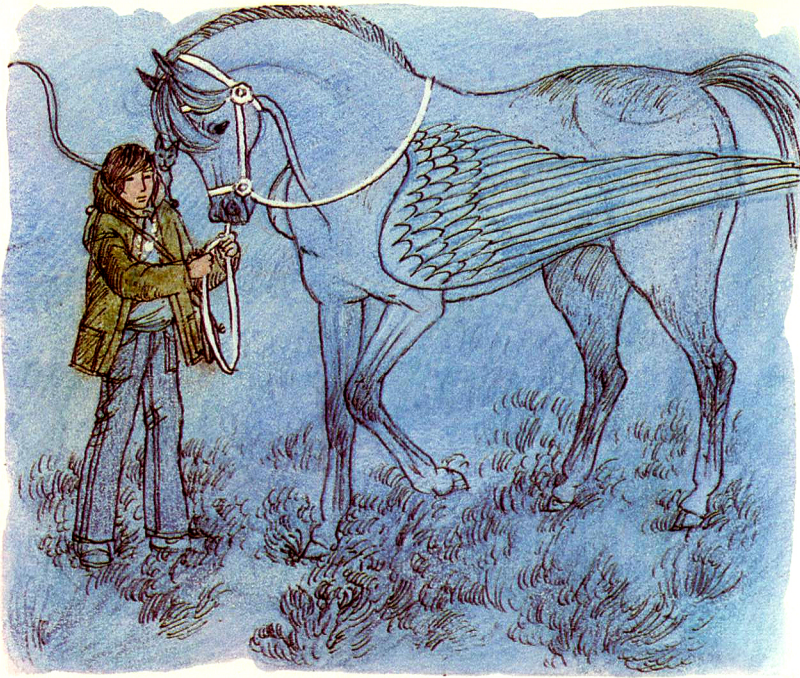


Tim looked down, and saw cliffs below him. A great headland jutted out into the sea. On the other side of the headland, Tim could see the sands of a little bay, white in the moonlight, with great, dark cliffs rising up on every side.

They were coming down.



The headland began to look more and more like a big, dark tower of rock. It was almost an island, but it was joined to the cliffs by a narrow neck of land. There were rocks in the sea, and Tim could see great stones on the edge of the cliffs. It looked a strange, wild place, as the night-horses swept down in the moonlight towards the Dark Tower.



Tim's night-horse glided down, folded his great wings against his sides, and landed on short grass on the headland. Tim slipped off his back and stood close to the horse's head, still holding the silver reins in his hand. Sebastian jumped from the horse's back on to Tim's shoulder.

Nicola and Jeremy landed near him.

"Are you all right?" Tim called, as they slid down from the horses' backs on to the grass.

"I'm all right," said Jeremy. "Wasn't it an exciting ride?"

“I’m cold,” said Nicola. “What about you, Tim?”

“Cold, and a bit stiff,” said Tim. “But we’re there, now. This must be the Dark Tower. It couldn’t be anything else.”

“I remember it,” said Nicola. “I was here once, years and years ago, with Grandfather Strome.”

“I wish we could keep the horses,” said Jeremy. “Do you think we could find a cave for them somewhere?”

“No,” said Tim. “Alan told us to let the horses go free, when we got to the Dark Tower. He promised the horses that we’d let them go.”

Sebastian jumped down off Tim’s shoulder, and rubbed himself against his legs. Tim stroked the head of his night-horse. The horse pushed his nose into Tim’s hand, and blew softly on his fingers. Tim unfastened the reins and bridle, and pulled them off.

“There you are,” he said. “You’re free now. You’d better get away before the sun comes up. It won’t be long.”

Nicola and Jeremy unfastened the reins and bridles on their horses too. The three big horses trotted off over the grass. They didn’t seem at all afraid of the children. They broke into a gallop. As they came to the edge of the cliff, they spread their great wings, and took off into the air.

Tim, Nicola and Jeremy stood watching them, as they flew higher and higher. Then the horses swung back, away from the sea, and headed for the hills.

“They’re gone,” said Nicola sadly. “I did hope they’d stay.”

“They had to go,” said Tim. “It isn’t long till morning.”

Nicola shivered. “It’s cold,” she said.

“We must light the fires,” said Tim. “We must do that first of all. Three fires on the Dark Tower. It’s the signal that we’re here. Then the birds can fly to the island as soon as it’s light, and Grandfather Strome will bring the boat for you. That’ll take all day – and perhaps tomorrow night, too. I forgot to ask how long he’d be. Do you know how long it takes to bring a boat over?”

“I don’t remember,” said Nicola.

“You’ve been there before?” asked Tim in surprise.

“We lived there once,” said Nicola. “But it was long ago. It’s a wonderful place, Tim. You will come with us, won’t you?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim. “But the first thing we have to do now, is to light three fires. Let’s find some wood.”

Tim thought they would find plenty of wood on the Dark Tower, but they didn’t. There wasn’t very much wood about. There was some dry heather, but it was very hard to pull it up or break it off, and it cut their hands.

There were a few dry sticks in some dead bushes, but not many, and there was some dry bracken.

They made three piles of dry bracken and heather, and tossed on them any bits of sticks which they could find. Tim lit the piles with his matches, and the three fires flared up into the night.



“Get as much wood and dead stuff as you can find,” cried Tim, as he hunted about for sticks among the heather. “We’ll keep them going for a bit. We’re all cold.”

“It’s a good signal,” said Jeremy, dropping an armful of dry bracken on the nearest fire. “Anyone could see it for miles.”

Tim stopped. “So they could,” he said slowly.

“What is it, Tim?” asked Nicola. “What’s wrong?”

“Well,” said Tim, “it’s just that if *anyone* can see the fires, Mandrake’s friends can see them too.”

“But they’re not here,” said Jeremy. “We left them all miles away down in the south. We took the horses, and there hasn’t been a wind. The witches couldn’t come north.”

“Mandrake may have other friends, and so may the witches,” said Tim. “I think we’ll let the fires go out now. We’ve given the signal.”

He looked at Nicola. He could see in the firelight that she was looking pale and tired.

“You and Jeremy sleep, Nicola,” he said. “I’ll keep watch. I don’t expect anyone will come, but I’ll keep watch all the same. You two lie down here in the heather, and get some sleep.”

“You’ll never be able to stay awake long, Tim,” said Nicola. “Wake me in a little while, and I’ll keep watch for you, and you can sleep.”

“I’ll be all right,” said Tim. “I’ll try and keep watch until the sun comes up, anyway. I don’t think it will matter as much then.”



The fires were dying down quickly. There were three glowing piles of burnt heather and bracken. Nicola lay down in a patch of heather, and Jeremy found a comfortable place on some dry moss.



Tim sat down near them, by the ashes of one of the fires. He looked up at the sky. The moon was setting over the sea, and a long pathway of silver lay across the water. The sky in the east was beginning to look pale. It would soon be day.

A little wind blew through the heather.

Tim shivered. Then he noticed that the wind was blowing from the north. That meant the witches couldn't ride up from the south after them. He leant back against a rock. There was a little purr, and Sebastian jumped out of the dark heather, and on to his knee. He stroked Sebastian and stared into the glowing ashes of the fire. He was very tired.

Sebastian settled down, and went to sleep.

Tim found his eyes closing. He made himself open them, and look at the sky. It was growing lighter. The stars were beginning to look pale.

A moment or two later, his head fell forward. He jerked it up again.

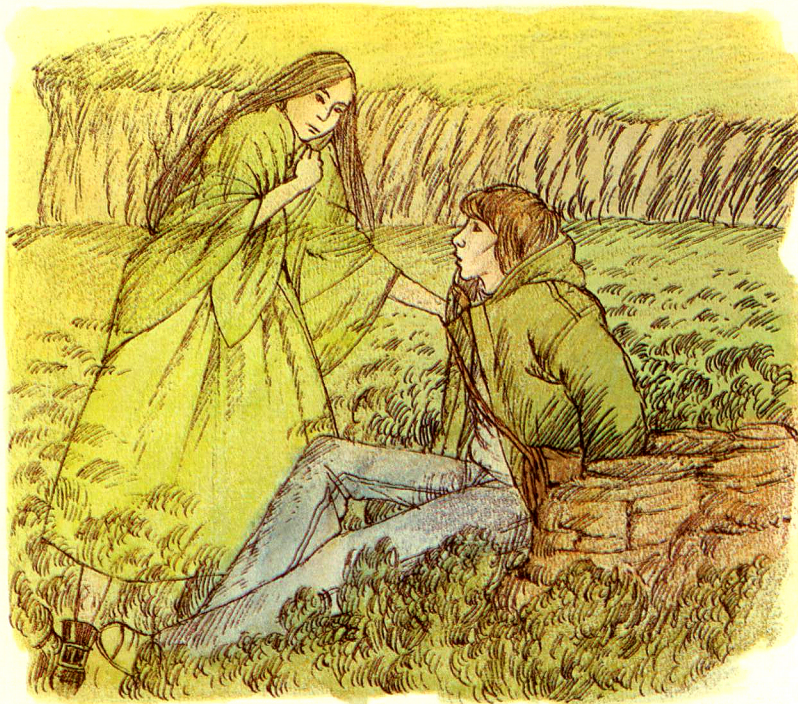
"I mustn't go to sleep," he said to himself. "I mustn't go to sleep. Not yet."

He shivered again, and slid down into the heather, with Sebastian still on his knees. Sebastian woke up for a moment, looked around, gave a little purr, and settled down to go to sleep again.

It was warmer in the heather. The fire was out now.

"I mustn't go to sleep," Tim murmured.

He tried counting, to keep himself awake. "One, two, three, four, five, six . . ." His head fell forwards again, and this time it didn't jerk back. Tim was asleep.



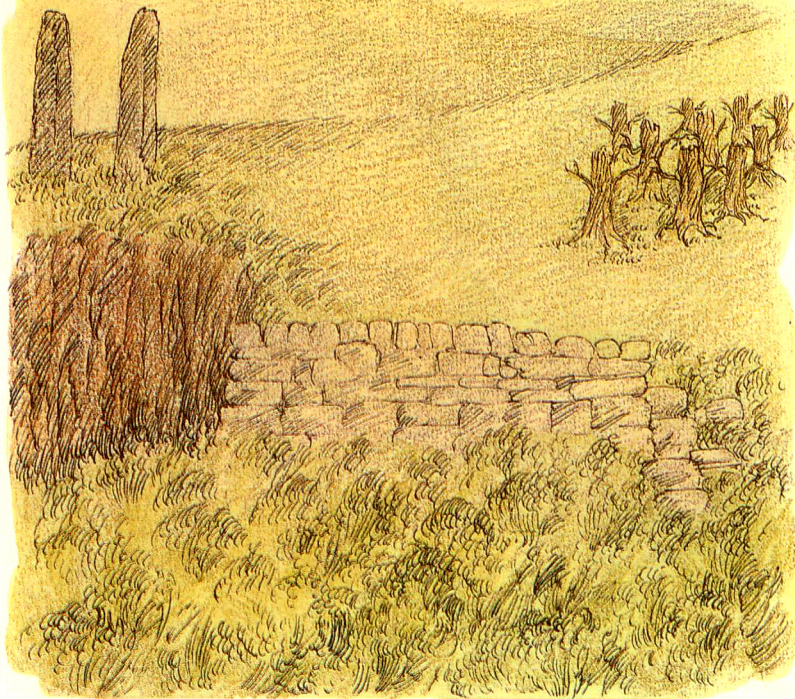
He woke up to find the sun shining, and Nicola shaking him.

“Tim!” cried Nicola. “Tim! Wake up!”

Tim sat up. The sun was beginning to drop towards the west. He must have been sleeping nearly all day!

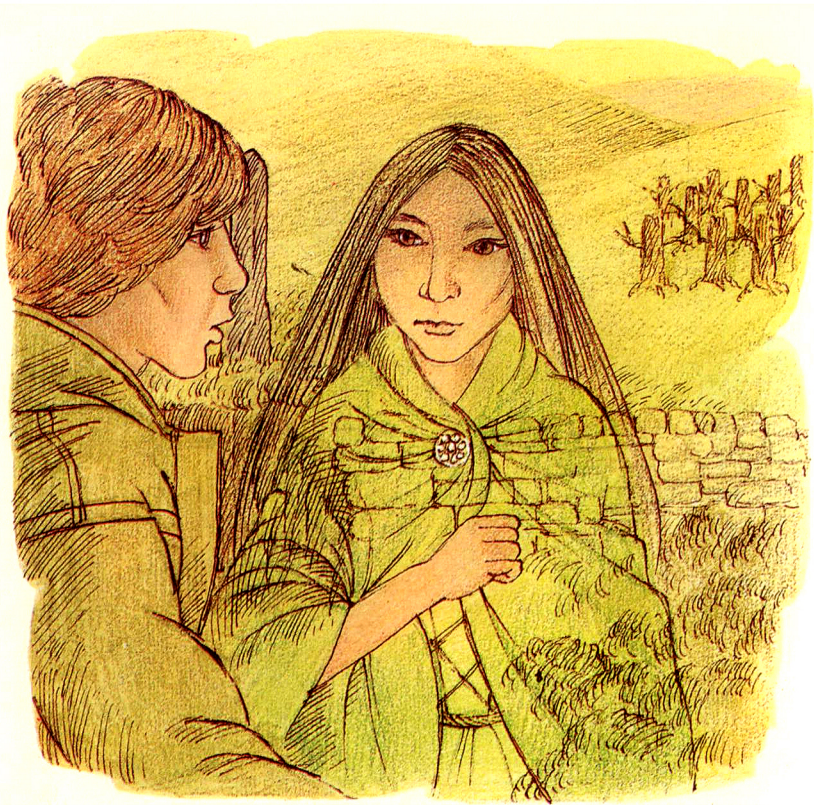
“Is everything all right?” he asked, scrambling to his feet.

“I don’t know,” said Nicola. “But there’s something strange out there, Tim.” She pointed towards the moor. “Look at those old tree stumps.”



Tim looked across the neck of land that joined the headland to the cliffs. There was a low, stone wall across it, with an opening where there had once been a gate. On the far side of the wall, Tim saw the stumps of nine or ten old, dead-looking trees, standing in the heather.

“I’m sure those tree stumps were farther away, when I first looked,” said Nicola. “I haven’t seen them move, but I’m sure they’re closer now.”



“I shouldn’t have gone to sleep,” said Tim.

“It’s a good thing you did,” said Nicola. “You can’t go on all night and all day, too. We couldn’t have done anything, except stay here.”

“We’ve got to get down to the sands,” said Tim. “We’d better go down as quickly as we can. Where’s Sebastian?”

"I think he's gone off, looking for a way down," said Nicola. "I saw him run off along the edge of the cliffs a long time ago, before I saw the tree stumps."

"We've got to get down to the sands," said Tim again. "The stumps will never be able to climb down those cliffs after us."

"What do you mean?" whispered Nicola, her face going white.

"I think—I think they may be stump people," said Tim. "Haven't you seen them before?"

Nicola shook her head.

"I saw them last year," said Tim. "I saw them by the canal, on the way to Melinda's cottage. They're invisible people—even the Hidden People can't see them—except when they go inside a tree stump. They put it on like clothes—only they have to use it for a body, too. They use the branches and roots for arms and legs. And you can see their eyes, too." He looked across at the stumps as he spoke. "If you see two eyes open in a stump, you'll know one of the stump people is inside. Or if those stumps move, we'll know they're there, too."

"I'm sure they're closer," whispered Nicola. "Are they friends of the wind witches?"

"I expect so," said Tim. "They were friends of the wild witches, last year. Anyway, they're not friends of ours. Wake Jeremy, and we'll find a way down to the sands."



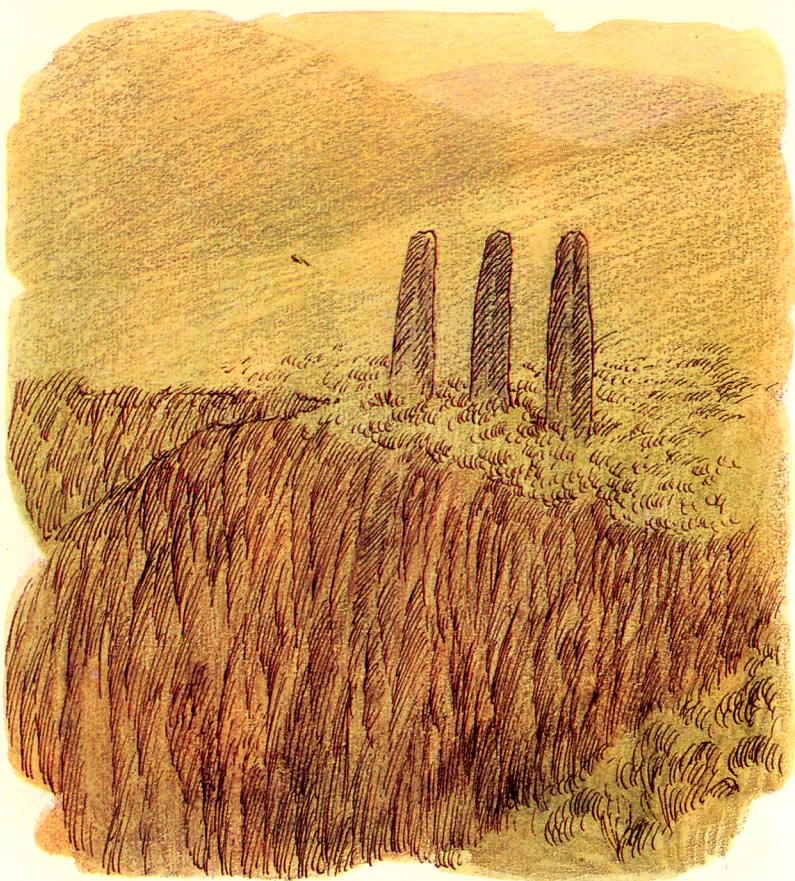
Nicola slipped over to where Jeremy was still sleeping in the heather, and shook his arm.

Tim kept his eyes on the tree stumps. As he watched, he saw one of them move. A great root moved up into the air, like a leg. It dropped down closer to the wall, dug into the ground, and pulled the tree trunk forwards.

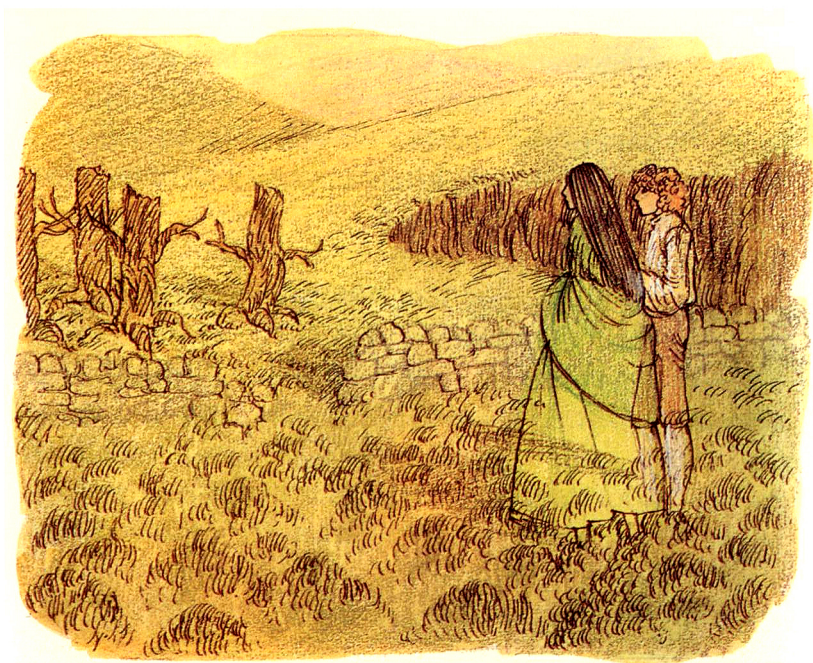


Tim ran across to the edge of the cliff, jumping over the patches of heather. He lay down when he came to the edge, and looked over.

The cliff dropped down to the sea below him like a great wall of rock. No wonder people called the headland 'The Dark Tower'. There was no way in which they could climb down those cliffs to the sands below. He wished that he had kept the night-horses until the fires had been lit. They could have flown down to the sands then. But it was too late to think of that now.



Tim looked across at the cliffs at the back of the cove, and almost at once he saw the path down. It was a very narrow one. It began by three big stones, on the edge of the cliff a hundred yards away, and ran down through rocks and heather to the sands. It was the only possible way to climb down.



Tim jumped to his feet. They would have to get across the neck of land, to get to the beginning of the path.

The tree stumps were much closer. They were pulling themselves slowly along towards the wall. Tim could see their eyes now, looking towards him. Nicola and Jeremy were standing in the heather, staring at them.

“What shall we do, Tim?” cried Nicola, as he ran back towards them. “What are we going to do?”

“We’ve got to get across to those three big rocks,” said Tim. “There’s a path there, leading down the cliff. They’ll never be able to follow us down that path. Come on.”

They ran towards the wall. But as they did so, the stump people moved faster. They pulled themselves along by the branches and roots of the old trees. By the time Tim got to the wall, they were across the neck of land like a fence of waving branches.

Tim stopped.

“We can’t get across, Tim,” Nicola said in a whisper, as she stopped beside him.

Jeremy picked up a stone, and threw it at one of the stumps. Two great green eyes opened in the wood, and stared at Jeremy. The stump moved forwards towards the gap in the wall.



“We’ll light a fire,” said Tim. “That’ll hold them back. Quickly. Get some bracken.”

They pulled up bracken and dry heather and a few sticks, and piled them up in the gap in the wall as fast as they could. Tim pulled out his matches and lit the pile. He stepped back, as the flames shot upwards. He looked towards the stump people.

They had stopped, and were standing still, watching him. But as Tim looked at them, they began to move slowly forwards again, away from the fire, but towards the wall.

There were so few sticks, that Tim couldn’t make a big fire. He wondered where the stump people had found the old tree stumps. He thought that they must have come a long way. He shivered. It was a good thing there hadn’t been any old tree stumps closer to the Dark Tower. If there had been, the stump people might have got there when it was still dark.

Tim heard a sound by his foot, and looked down. Sebastian was standing beside him. He was twitching his tail as hard as he could. But the stump people still moved on. Tim knew that Sebastian was trying to hold them back by magic, but he couldn’t do it. Their magic must be stronger than Sebastian’s.

Jeremy tossed an armful of bracken on the fire, and it flared up for a few moments. But Tim knew they couldn’t keep it going for long.

Then, suddenly, he remembered the silver coin. Melinda had given him three coins a year ago, when he was in danger. He had thrown one coin at a wolf, and the second coin at one of the stump people. The old stump had burst into flames, and the stump man inside had left it, and vanished. He still had the third coin, hanging around his neck.

Tim slipped it off, and stood holding the coin in his hand. If he threw it away, the stump people wouldn't be able to hurt him. He might even break up the line of stumps by throwing it at them. But then he wouldn't be able to see Nicola and Jeremy any more. He'd never know if Grandfather Strome found them there, safe. The wind witches might come, and he'd never see them. He couldn't throw it away. He looked at the silver chain, hanging down from the coin, and remembered Grandmother Roon. He wouldn't lose the coin, if he had the chain. In a flash, Tim knew what to do.

He held the chain in his hand, and let the coin fall to the end of it. Then he sprang forwards towards the wall. The stump people were already climbing over it; two stumps had pulled themselves up on top of it. Long roots were waving over the wall.

"Keep back, you two!" Tim shouted to Nicola and Jeremy. He jumped over a patch of heather.

He was at the wall now. He swung the coin back on the silver chain, and then lashed out with it, as if it were a whip.

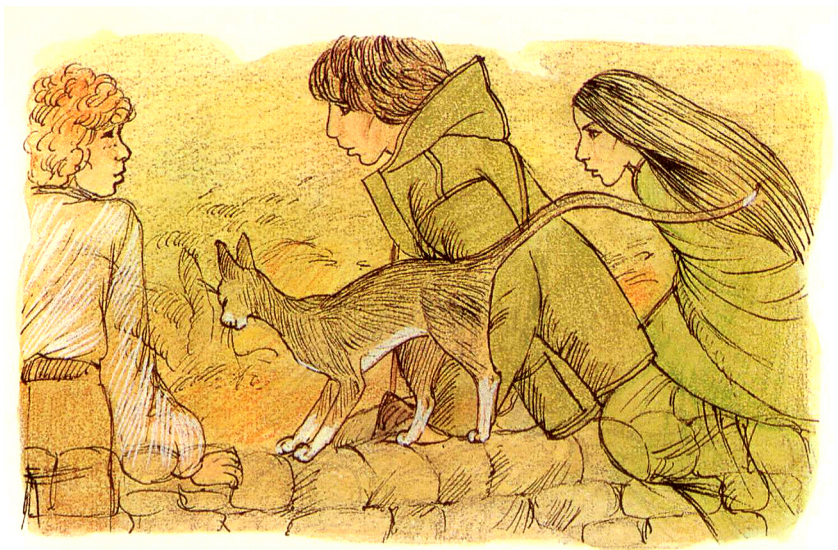




The coin hit one of the long roots of a tree stump on the wall. The whole stump burst into flames, and fell backwards on to the grass on the far side.

Tim ran to another part of the wall, where a stump man was trying to pull himself back, out of the way. He struck out again with the coin. And again, as the coin touched a branch, the stump burst into flames and fell apart on the top of the wall.

The other tree stumps fell over, and lay on the ground, as the stump people left them. There were no eyes in the old stumps now. They were just so many bits of old wood. The stump people had vanished.



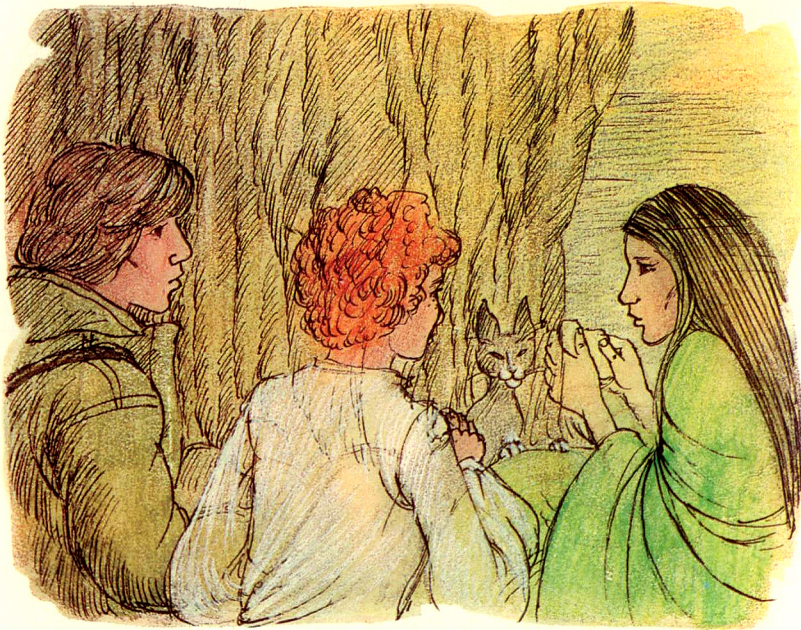
Tim turned back to Nicola and Jeremy.

"Come on," he said. "This way."

Sebastian was already standing on the wall. The ash on the fire they had made in the gap was still glowing red. Tim climbed up on to the wall, beside Sebastian, and Nicola and Jeremy joined him.

Tim jumped down, and led the way across the heather to the three rocks. A steep, narrow path led down, over the edge of the cliff to the sands below.

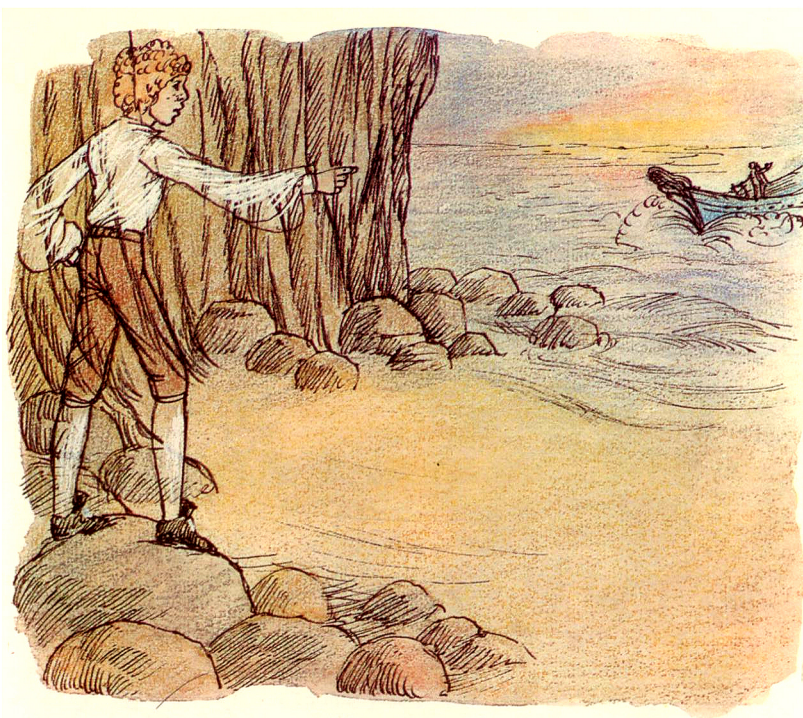
Even on the path, it took them a long time to climb down. It was very steep, and in some places they had to climb over rocks sticking out of the cliff. Tim could see that Nicola and Jeremy were tired, and his own knees were shaking a little, when he dropped down over the last rock on to the sands of the cove.



The sun was setting over the sea, and the sky was red and orange and gold. Great waves were breaking on the sands, and the high cliffs towered up on three sides of them.

Tim pulled the bread and cheese out of his bag. He had forgotten all about food, in the fight with the stump people, but now he felt almost weak with hunger, and he was sure that Nicola and Jeremy must be hungry too. They sat down on the sand to eat, and Tim shared his bread and cheese with Sebastian.

"It's getting dark, Tim," said Nicola, as they finished. "I wish the boat would come."



There was a cry from Jeremy. He had climbed up on a rock, and was looking out to sea.

“Look!” he cried, pointing to the west. “Look, Nicola! There’s the boat! There’s Grandfather! Grandfather Strome!”

Tim and Nicola stood up, and looked out to sea.

A boat was coming in over the waves. An old man with white hair was standing at the wheel. The boat seemed to cut its way through the water, and Tim was sure that Grandfather Strome must be using magic to drive it along. No ordinary boat could cut through the waves like that.



Grandfather Strome lifted his arm. The boat rode the crests of the last waves in to the shore, and ran up on the beach: Two metal feet shot out from its sides, and the boat stayed there, upright and waiting.

Grandfather Strome leapt over the side of the boat, on to the sands. He opened his arms, and Nicola ran down to him, and flung herself into them, with Jeremy at her heels.

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A Series

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3. Tim Meets Captain Jory
4. Tim and the Smugglers
5. Tim and the Witches
6. The Highwayman
7. Magic in The Yard
8. The Key

B Series

1. The Return of the Key
2. Captain Jory Lends a Hand
3. The Stump People
4. Watchers in The Yard
5. Red for Danger
6. At the House of the Safe Witch
7. Tim in Hiding
8. On the Night of the Full Moon

C Series

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2. Tim in Trouble
3. On the Road to the North
4. Riding into Danger
5. Mandrake's Castle
6. Escape by Night
7. Three Fires on the Dark Tower
8. Tim Rides on the Ghost Bus

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Flightpath to Reading C7



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